PRESS FREEDOM PROJECT
COUNTRY DESK: MONGOLIA
REPORTER: ODONCHIMEG BATSUKH
SOURCE: AMARZAYA OYUNBAT

Reporter: **How are you? Please tell me your name, your work in the journalism sector and where you work and live.**

Source: My name is Amarzaya Oyunbat. I have been working as a journalist locally for 23 years without interruption. I founded and work for Arkhangai Media Group, which merged all newspapers, television stations, magazines, news sites, FM radio and radio stations of Arkhangai province. I work as its editor and director.

Reporter: How did you start your career in journalism?
Source: In 2000, I graduated the National University of Mongolia as a journalist and directly came to Arkhangai province. At that time, activities around television stations and newspapers in our province were problematic and basically, television was not operating anymore. The reason is that the Law on Media Freedom was adopted in 1998 in Mongolia, which led to media outlets owned by the government ending their operations, and the situation was like that. At that time, since I came back to my hometown as a professional journalist, the status of the television station was transferred under the Citizens' Representative Assembly of the province, and they employed me to work for the television to revive it. The television station was affiliated with the Citizens' Representative Assembly because it is not a direct governmental organization, but a local self-governing body. While I worked for the television station as a journalist, I also worked for a FM radio as a host, and after three years, I launched my newspaper called "Arkhangai Life." At that time, the situation of newspapers was stagnant especially the newspapers, which were under the control of the government during the socialist era for many years, were inactive, and several free newspapers, which began their operations after the transition to democracy, worked without any stability for a while and then stopped their publication; I started my newspaper in that kind of situation and it has been

20 solid years since then. Since that time, I have always thought about how to develop journalism with a very few professional people, while there is a serious lack of professional personnel, journalists, and professional media staff in the process of me working for the television station, working as a host for the FM radio and editing my newspaper at the same time. Then after five years, I initiated to establish an organization called Media Center and did it accordingly. However, its status was regulated as a property and the property of the television station was under the government control, but not under the direct management of a government organization. But that status did not go far. The reason is that since this property was owned by the government, there were situations like province authorities censor content in one way or the other, they do not accept criticism, and they would be upset claiming that they were criticized. One clear example is that a new governor was appointed to rule our province in 2010, and the governor issued a decree to dismiss me as the head of the Media Center. This is a clear example showing that the government has an interest to manage media. So, I gave up my role and duty as the head of Media Center, but took over my newspaper, established a new television station, and founded my newsroom, which was 12 years ago from now. Since that time, I have always set goals of working and developing independent and free press in its genuine meaning. Since the media is not under the government control and does not depend on someone, I have always desired to expand my newsroom and how to properly organize, unite, and operate very few professionals in our local area. Then we shifted to the structure of Arkhangai Media Group 5 years ago, or since 2018. Whereas we had a television station and newspaper, now we started a magazine and a news site, and as we increased the number of editorial media outlets, we started working at the level of a media group. Local media outlets are moving in this direction without any choice. This shows that there is an actual necessity to unite and work together instead of wasting our efforts by working separately with scarce professional personnel, while one person has a newspaper and another one has a television station. So, I have been successfully running my Arkhangai Media Group for the fifth year.

Reporter: Have you faced challenges during the process of your reporting over 25 years of work experience in journalism? Has there been any case in which you were intimidated or pressured? Please elaborate this case of yours.

Source: Generally, I have produced many pieces on specific topics since I worked as a journalist by reporting news for television, writing article for the newspaper, and working on stories which raise important issues. For example, my articles remain vividly as evidence on more than 800 old, yellowish pages of our newspaper. I would like to sample an example from these articles. For instance, I wrote a series of articles on how air pollution is violating the right to live in a safe, healthy environment. Smog issue of Tsetserleg soum, which us the center of our Arkhangai province, is becoming the most pressing issue. There is one special characteristic for Arkhangai province. Only one company manufacturing heating and insulation monopolizes the industry without any competition. I raised many issues surrounding the smog problem by asking many questions such as "How did this company become a monopoly?" "Why does not smog decrease?" "What kind of social responsibility does this company have?" and "Are they able to work in a friendly, favorable manner for citizens?" I have worked on tasks ranging from exposing facts proving how the company got to own 100% of the heating manufacturing grid to reflecting complaints and views of citizens in my articles; in other words, citizens file loads of complaints to journalists and media organizations stating that smog is becoming harsh on them, especially not only citizens, but also apartment dwellers and entities complain about their heating and insulation problems and there are issues of consumers becoming victims, and there are many cases in which these complaints and views are openly posted as criticisms on social media and their views and opinions are expressed through journalists and media organizations. So, I wrote my reporting and articles based on reality in this context and wrote them in the form of a story, article, or investigative journalism. The most crucial aspect of it was that the company did not only cause damage to citizens and business entities, but also got the province authorities, the ministry, and the government stuck in court for 3-4 years. Arkhangai province was selected as one of 10

provinces to have their own heating/thermal power stations, but the company had filed a complaint appeal to court stating that the company by itself would build the thermal station, and the case had not been resolved for 3-4 years. In other words, citizens were obviously upset that the company insisted to build the station by itself implying its monopolized privilege would grow even bigger, whereas there are many issues to solve by the company, such as its failure to install filters on chimneys of steam stoves, its failure to resolve the emission of black smog, and its failure to provide people and citizens with sufficient heating. I have written my news pieces and articles on these issues, becoming the voice of the public. In this process, there were cases in which they disconnected heating of apartments of not only my organization, my home, and even the apartment affiliated with the organization of my husband's work. They did not directly file complaints related to my articles, but they intimidated me as a consumer of heating. Therefore, my organization and my family stopped receiving heating from that company. Consequently, its employees came to the fence of our organization holding spades and hoes in their hands, explaining that there was heating leaked in our thermal grid so that they had to dig and check. Then we called the police, and it was handled accordingly. Soon they filed a claim accusing us that we caused the heating leakage and damage of about 20 million Mongolian togrog, but at that time it was spring, and we had disconnected the heating. This is a huge sum of money, and if we were leaking heating when it came to this issue, we would have had suffered loads of damage; if there was heating leakage, the thermal grid would have been frozen or similar safety issues must have emerged, but there was no such issues, so we filed a complaint to the Energy Regulatory Committee of Mongolia, which resulted in the Committee resolving it quite urgently concluding that this organization was not to blame based on its review, and sent an official letter to the company not to intimidate its consumers of heating manufacture. Such case occurred. But it did not end there, and one day the court called me saying that another claim was filed, and we were summoned to court. So, I went to court and the case registry process started. That is how things started in terms of fact checking, how I entered a relationship with the company, claim, and debt issues. I noticed one thing during this process of gathering materials at the court. It was obvious that

the company was given advantages during the process of gathering judicial materials. At that time, I had no attorney and went ahead collecting my evidence and documents and thinking that it is possible to defend myself given that I wrote truth, people know about it, or it is not a complaint related to my articles, and it is possible to be resolved. However, the situation was different, and the opponent had advantages, and it looked like I would be defeated in court.

Reporter: How did you find it out? What made you have this kind of impression?

Source: When court staff collected materials, their attitude showed it and they demanded original copies of facts and documents from us, whereas I heard that they received the same materials from the opponents by email, so the circumstances were different for us, and I started to suspect and brought an attorney from Ulaanbaatar city. Then the trial began. My attorney defended very well and did his job excellently proving that the process of collecting materials for court was done with illegal attitudes, and the first complaint was that the treatment was unequal; second, conflict of interests of the judge who was leading the trial was raised during the trial by my attorney to request that we did not want the same judge, so the judge suspended and ended the trial. The result of the trial was that the claimant withdrew his claim, and the judicial process was put to an end like that.

Reporter: What kind of experience and lessons did this process teach you?

Source: I was thinking about one thing based on what happened to me. If I attended the trial without any attorney, the company had already done their homework that I would have fallen into a trap to pay a fee of over 20 million Mongolian togrog; on the other hand, I understood that people rumoring about certain relationships formed among the company, attorneys, and judges was right. They did not complain about the articles I wrote and reporting I did, but they tried to silence me by making me fall into debts by the trial. When I had tried to get information and comments from the director of the company, they had always refused to engage.

Reporter: Is it okay to consider that this issue is completely resolved? In which year did the court issue happen?

Source: The court case happened in 2020. It has been three years since then, but we still live with smog now. I have been working on news and reporting on smog-related issues such as Tsetserleg city's smog issues, heating issues, and suspension of power plant, etc. whereas the company has not filed any complaints as of now, and we do not have any relationship. To clarify, our organization solves its heating and insulation issues by ourselves thanks to environmentally friendly energy and do not receive heating from that company without emitting smog.

Reporter: Has this event changed your attitudes towards your work and your approach to how you conduct your work? If so, how did it change them?

Source: Firstly, this case reminded me once again how a journalist should work thoroughly in terms of sources, facts, and complying with ethical codes and principles. Secondly, especially when it comes to being summoned to court, I realize that you should not take it lightly and you should always protect yourself, and it gave me warnings that we should have excellent legal knowledge. Generally, 20 million togrog is a huge risk for a small local newsroom, and if I had paid this amount, perhaps my organization would have had problematic operations, and I would not deny that a journalist under psychological and economic pressures would be discouraged to produce journalistic work effectively. On the other hand, as they claimed that they had no complaint about my work, it was my advantage and the biggest inspiration for me. So, I understood that if I did my job very well, my protection will be my job, and I reconfirmed that I should do my job as a journalist properly and exceptionally well.

Reporter: How do you feel about your journalistic work when comparing its past with present? How much change do you think occurred between then and now?

Source: I have been learning new things every day in the process of journalism. As someone who has been working for the local media sector for over 20 years, I have accumulated certain experiences, but I face daily necessity to further develop myself. The so-called conventional media, such as television, magazine, newspaper, and radio have been developed, but we are entering the sphere of online journalism or online sites, and this space is an ocean of borderless journalism. This is a very huge change, requiring more skills from us. When I started to work as a journalist, it was the transition period, which was 2000, or the beginning of the millennium. So, I was a fresh, new journalist when the outdated media of the previous regime was phasing out and I needed to work at a new level. I witnessed a technology of putting a letter in the newspaper one by one with a lead press during my internship, and I am not sure about current journalists who saw something like that. Then when I compare it with today's level after about 20 years, we are living in the era of advanced development. So, how we should work at this level is to gain utmost trust of the public. In general, people trust media less and less. As online space allows everyone to express their opinions, media outlets are facing online attacks. Which one is media? Which one is a journalist? Therefore, it is necessary to produce excellent work to be more ethical and to gain public trust in these circumstances. If we work well in these situations, we will have advantages at the professional level, so I think we are facing challenges of how to avoid online wave and withstand online attacks by working with fast speed and walking ahead of our society.

Reporter: Are the topics you cover the ones that face restrictions at our province level, or at the national level?

Source: Personally, I am interested in writing articles and producing my journalistic work in the fields of environment, society, agriculture, health, and education. However, one faces necessity to write on all topics in a local newsroom. I did fact-based reporting on women's rights in the goldmine and footprints of irresponsible mining. After that, there were some attempts of pressing me. After publishing articles related to politics or politicians, a representative of the province Citizens' Representatives Assembly would

call me to scold with a loud voice in fury and to express one's complaint over the journalistic work in a very rude manner.

Reporter: Are there any taboo topics for journalists in our country?

Source: Great patience, psychological preparedness, sacrifice, and risks are involved without any doubt when reporting, investigating, and writing on human rights issues addressing rights and interests of authorities and officials in terms of relevant bribery and corruption. Therefore, it takes time and efforts to write on these topics, and we should not be careless without protecting ourselves and without any preparations. There are some specialized journalists who write on these closed, restricted topics, and it is common that they face intimidations and challenges.

Reporter: Why do you think the press freedom in our country is restricted? What are its contributing factors?

Source: Mongolia has a very concise law on media freedom with only four provisions. As far as I know, it has been over 10 years since the attempt to amend this law started. The reason why it takes such a long time to revise and amend the law is that I think that interests of politicians, public officials, authorities, and government-related issues are in the way, so they are very careful about this process. If this law is amended, there will be a huge change made in media freedom, and journalists and newsrooms will have better opportunities to be distinct from each other and to work more effectively. Since our country's press freedom is not really in a tough situation, but still problematic, I think we have partial freedom. Having said that, we won't sit idly waiting for the change after the amended law; there are issues that depend a lot on media organizations, so many of us should do our best to work with professional ethics and to be able to work independently.

Reporter: What are the consequences of restricting press freedom? What is loss for journalists? What is loss for citizens?

Source: Freedom of speech and freedom of expression are simple yet fundamental human rights, so journalism should be a supporter, helper, and partner for people to enjoy these rights. It is said that media and journalism are the guard dog of society. However, in the circumstances where there is partial freedom and insufficient laws, people's freedom of expression is not guaranteed. If media is powerful and citizens have information, this freedom will be ensured. I think why corruption and bribery have reached criminal levels and human rights are violated is because our media is not independent to certain extent and voter's educations is poor.

Reporter: What can newsrooms do to protect journalists?

Source: As a small local newsroom, we have pressing issues of becoming financially capable. Media organizations should be able to finance journalistic work on the one hand, and to finance its activities by doing business on the other hand. I would like to add that the government should offer solutions at the policy level. A newsroom with financial capability develops and can protect its journalists. Financial reliability and guarantee of newsrooms allow its journalists to do their jobs. I think that the pressing issue facing the media sector of Mongolia is safety of journalists and ensuring to work without any censorship and editorial pressure and intimidation. I also think that the protection mechanism for journalists is weak in Mongolia. In addition, it is necessary for newsrooms to improve legal knowledge of their journalists and to remind them to comply with their professional ethical principles.

Reporter: How can citizens support and protect the press freedom of their country?

Source: As a local newsroom, when we make citizens our sources to raise their voices and to have their views and opinions amplified, it is common that they avoid being sources and giving interviews. On the other hand, they tend to blame and criticize journalists claiming that the media did not address this issue or that certain journalist wrote this and that. Addressing and discussing issues through human stories are prominent internationally, so we will go after them whether they want it or not. So, I wish our citizens

would understand media and journalism and then participate. Trusting and partnering with media when bringing up issues and expressing their views and opinions have impact on producing good work. This will be the so-called pre-condition for ensuring press freedom.

Reporter: How do you imagine the future of journalists of our country? Do you think that the situation will get better or will deteriorate in the future?

Source: If journalists comply with ethics, better works will be produced, and consequently journalism will develop. Journalism will develop if newsrooms change their source level to reflect society better by ensuring civil rights and freedoms to address voices of those who should be given voices, such as herders living deep in the mountain, miners working on the ground, and people with disabilities instead of going after the same old politicians and making them their routine sources. We already have such best practice and attitude in Mongolia, and it has been developing. Mongolian organizations such as Media Council, Globe International non-governmental organization, Press Institute, Free Press Foundation, local media association, and association of television stations have been doing great many works to develop Mongolian journalism and the media sector. Thanks to this, newsrooms have become orderly, and journalists have been improved, creating many best practices in which journalists comply with ethical principles, and I believe that as the progress is made, the future of Mongolian media sector and journalism development would look much brighter.

Reporter: What is press freedom for you?

Source: The international free press document called “Harti” declares that free press means free citizens. Therefore, press freedom is a civil freedom. Arkhangai Media Group is striving to reflect and implement this content in its editorial policy. We aim to improve press freedom in local areas by developing citizen journalism. Our organizational experience is that we became the first local newsroom, which has reporters in all soums of our

province. They are not professional journalists, but are from various age, gender, and professional backgrounds representing teachers, herders, lawyers, scholars, elders, youth, men, and women. By doing so, we aim to raise diverse voices of society and allow non-professionals and the public to understand media. The goal behind it is to aspire towards press freedom. Here I would like to quote information from Globe International Center, which goes, “The nature of choosing the profession of journalist is to fulfill one’s “promise” to provide at least nearest-true, evidence-based information in case one cannot give the absolute truth. It is crucial for journalists to know the priority of what is most important.” For journalists to be able to perform well, newsrooms should have financial capacity. The public, private sector, and civil society organizations should also support it. If the public understand and value that journalism serves public wellbeing, they will trust and join us in great quantity. In this way, press freedom will improve. If press freedom improves, human rights will be ensured. The nature of journalism and media is for the sake of social good.